

In Vegas, Tradition Gives Way to Commerce

by Robert Thompson

Gambling and golf go together like a \$5 Nassau and a Sunday foursome. But one of the first gambles on the Las Vegas strip – the famed Desert Inn Golf Course – may have finally lost the bet, and if it disappears as expected, a piece of golfing history will go with it.



Courtesy of The Desert Inn Golf Club

The Desert Inn Golf Club sits behind Fairways No. 1 and 10

Desert Inn has a unique position in Vegas. Located right off The Strip, just down the road from the Venetian, the course has been part of the landscape since its opening in 1952. Howard Hughes even owned and lived at the hotel for a number of years in the 1960s.

However, this slice of history won't be with us for much longer. In April, 2000, the course was purchased by Vegas hotel mogul Steve Wynn as a present for his wife. The plans are to tear down the existing facilities – including the course – so

Wynn can build a bigger hotel. The golf course will be turned into a giant lake.

It's unfortunate that golf courses aren't often viewed like historical landmarks, especially when they have as interesting a past as Desert Inn. While in the United Kingdom, older golf courses are viewed with a sort of awe by tourists and natives alike, older U.S. courses often tend to be private and well heeled. Places like the Desert Inn are considered to be in the way of commerce and progress.

A look back

Think of what's gone on at Desert Inn. It's one of the courses Tiger Woods played when he recorded his first win on the PGA Tour in 1996 during the Las Vegas Invitational. And the course record of 62 is held by three men – one of whom is named Jack Nicklaus.

Part of the problem is that it was built during a period of time that didn't seem to turn out a lot of courses that have stood the test of time. In most respects, Lawrence Hughes' layout is interesting, but not overwhelming. It's not long, though the fairways are tight. It's a solid golf course that impresses, rather than amazes.

The new era

Basically, it pales in contrast to the new era of Vegas, in which Wynn has played a significant role. Nothing is subtle about the almost cartoon-like nature of the city, and Shadow Creek, the Tom Fazio-designed wonder that Wynn commissioned, fits right in.

Long known for its \$1,000 a round cost, Shadow Creek fits well with the over-the-top nature of Vegas. For most of its 10-year history, Shadow Creek has been perhaps the most exclusive public course in America. Not that it is really open to the pub-

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lic; it's only open to high-rolling guests of the MGM Mirage Resort properties – The Bellagio, Treasure Island, MGM Grand, New York-New York, Mirage and the Golden Nugget.

Flowers in the desert

Located 30 minutes off The Strip, Shadow Creek was designed so that golfers forget that they're really in the middle of the desert. Flowers bloom and the trees are fully mature. Much of this is due to the unlimited budget designer Tom Fazio had when working on the facility in the late 1980s. He didn't plant grass – the sod was flown in. An abundance of flowers, along with 21,000 fully grown trees, were flown in. Fazio has never owned up to his budget for the course, but it is

rumored to have been in the \$40-million range. He needed it. Essentially the land Fazio was given was desert-like and flat. From there he created a course where the desert can't even be seen. It's like finding an oasis in the middle of barren land.

Not that the money was the biggest factor in the wonder that became Shadow Creek. As Fazio has been quoted as saying, unlimited budgets don't necessarily make great golf courses. With Shadow Creek sitting among the top 30 courses in the world according to most polls, it would appear that in this case the money was well spent.

Things have changed a little at Shadow Creek over the past couple of

years. Wynn is gone, having sold his hotels to MGM Corp. In turn, the course is still open to guests, though the \$1,000 a round cost has been hacked in half.

In fact golf in Vegas has never been cheap – quite the contrary. Before it closes at the end of the year, Desert Inn remains open to anyone willing to try its traditional layout. Anyone with \$225, that is.

But it's worth it – and maybe you'll see the ghosts of Frank, JFK and Lyndon B. Johnson lurking just off the fairways. ▲

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